

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 15 (2011) 1514–1517

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCES-2011

Teachers' perception of school drop-out in Luxembourg

Raymond Meyers^{a*}, Claude Houssemand^a^aUniversity of Luxembourg, 2, Route de Diekirch, 7220 Walferdange, Luxembourg

Abstract

Semi-structured interviews were used with teachers in secondary vocational education in Luxembourg to find perceived causes of dropping out. Answers were grouped into four categories: perceived causes related to students, family, peers and school. Problems linked to educational and vocational guidance were highlighted. Specific characteristics of the Luxembourgish educational system (high proportion of immigrants, over-emphasis on foreign language education, lack of coordination between guidance services, insufficient work placement opportunities and school traps) were found to be perceived as related to dropping out. The views expressed provide useful insights and intervention options.

© 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

Keywords: dropping out, teachers, vocational guidance, Luxembourg;

1. Introduction

Dropping out of secondary education is a major problem in a knowledge-based economy and hinders progress towards the European Lisbon objectives. A better understanding of the causes and antecedents of these realities could help to design innovative intervention strategies. Luxembourg is a country with a high drop out rate (MENFP, 2009) and therefore the question is a sensitive issue in this country.

Past literature has shown that dropping out of schools cannot be explained by one single factor, but must be related to a multidimensional network of interdependent causes (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Millet & Thin, 2005). Teachers are in the frontline of the phenomena and can provide valuable insights. Perceptions of the causes are not necessarily identical to real causes, but could provide valuable research questions and intervention strategies that could be tested. The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions teachers of secondary education in Luxembourg have with regard to the causes of dropping out in their schools.

2. Sample and method

Semi-structured interviews were used with 18 teachers in secondary educational vocational branches (as opposed to general education). These parts of secondary education constitute two thirds of pupils and most young people at risk of dropping out are to be found in these branches (Eurydice, 2007). Teachers were selected based on the fact

* Raymond Meyers. Tel.: +352-466644-9526; fax: +352-466644-9556.

E-mail address: raymond.meyers@uni.lu.

that they were working primarily in classes where most pupils at risk are found. Answers were recorded, transcribed and systematically examined for indications of perceived causes of dropping out.

3. Results

For heuristic reasons, perceived causes were grouped into four categories: students, family, peers and schools. Teachers however, clearly insist on the interrelations and combinations of factors, rather than on one factor playing a determinant role.

3.1. Students

The triptych formed by intelligence, regular work, and motivation appears to be the most important factor concerning students. The interplay between these three facets is particularly important to consider.

3.1.1. Intelligence

Intelligence, understood as the ability to learn, is an important factor of success in school, lack of intelligence is also important in failure and dropping out. It is particularly true for students who are at the very low spectrum of IQ, because it makes learning difficult and discouraging. It is therefore not surprising that most dropouts are in the classes for difficult learners. Teachers believe however that most pupils have at least a sufficient level to get some form of diploma or certificate. So the problem is more a question of adequate orientation and correct information about the possibilities of schools and employment than of intelligence in itself.

3.1.2. Regular work

Regular work is an important ingredient of school success, because most competencies need a process of cumulative construction, every step needing antecedents and being followed by some deepening. The accumulation of missing parts has as a consequence that subsequent learning is rendered very difficult, particularly in the main subject matters (languages, sciences and mathematics). It is clear that sustainable work is, far more than intelligence, subject to all sorts of disturbances: insufficient help from teachers, lack of support from family, accumulation of missing bits of curricula, family conflicts, traumatic life events, etc. Some teachers also insist on the fact that due to the general social environment, which is often focused on consumption and fun searching, regular work is no longer valued. But once the cumulative process of knowledge acquisition interrupted, it is difficult to build up the process again, with the risk of a decline in efficiency and motivation.

3.1.3. Motivation

Motivation, be it intrinsic or extrinsic, is an important element in success and failure at school. But motivation depends on a lot of other factors, among others on the ability of the students (and so to the results he gets), on the meaning it has for him to study and also on the regularity of his work. It is particularly important that some form of motivation is present to incite regular work. At this level, some vicious circles may initiate which may lead sooner or later to dropping out. For example, irregular work (due to any reason) provokes first small situations of "dropping out" (lack of attention, being late, homework not done, incomplete notebooks, etc.) which generates bad school results. Poor results diminish motivation, which eventually weakens any form of regular work, etc., which in turn reduces motivation. Dropping out of school may be one of the possible consequences.

3.2. Family

Family situations and problems have been very regularly been put forward as explanations for dropping out. Several partly overlapping circumstances have been cited.

3.2.1. Children of socially disadvantaged families

These students are more at risk of dropping out. For example, if parents have themselves problems with literacy, it is difficult for them to provide adequate help to their children. In addition, they often do not perceive the importance of schooling in a more and more knowledge based society.

3.2.2. Young people from immigrant families

Immigrant children form a huge proportion of pupils in Luxembourg schools (45% in 2008-2009; see MENFP, 2010). Foreign people in Luxembourg are very diverse, but those who have the most difficulties at school are the children of those who came to compensate for a lack of unqualified labourers. These students therefore overlap very much with those of the preceding category, with an additional language problem. As they do not speak the

languages used in schools outside of the school environment (French and especially German, the language of education in primary and part of secondary schools), they are disadvantaged compared to Luxembourgish pupils.

The majority of difficulties are found with the young people who came to Luxembourg with their parents when they had already passed the age of school-entrance. In vocational secondary education there are pupils who came to the country when they were 12. They are put into special classes where they are supposed to learn French in one year, which is seldom very realistic. Opportunities to learn a profession are therefore very limited, as these pupils missed important pieces of the curriculum, and as learning is cumulative, these deficiencies tend to grow as the years pass.

3.2.3. Conflicts in families

Families with conflicts can also be a cause which inhibits regular work. All sorts of families are concerned, and conflicts can be between parents, or between parents and children. These conflicts may take up a lot of mental energy and interfere with regular work. Due to these conflicts, parents and students find it difficult to make plans for the future.

3.3. Peers

Several teachers cited positive influences from peers through help and encouragement, though negative effects were most frequently high-lightened. The fact that young people belong to peer groups that are unmotivated or even negative towards schools could be an important factor in quickening dropping out. In extreme cases, collective drug consumption or joining dysfunctional or pre-criminal peer groups were also considered as causes and as consequences of dropping out.

3.4. Schools

The causes of dropping out are also perceived as originating in the specific functioning of the Luxembourgish school system. Specific characteristics of this educational system (high proportion of immigrants, over-emphasis on foreign language education, lack of coordination between guidance services, insufficient work placement opportunities and school traps) were perceived as related to dropping out.

3.4.1. Insufficient or non adapted orientation

Problems linked to educational and vocational guidance were highlighted. Past reports of the OECD pointed to the fragmentation of guidance systems in Luxembourg (OCDE, 2003). In general secondary education, guidance is not so crucial, because most of the time pupils choose between curriculum specialisations. In the vocational track students have often to choose a profession already at age 15 which they may have to carry out for the rest of their lives. Two main problems were cited several times by the interviewed teachers. First, information about school tracks, available professions and general characteristics of the work environment is generally insufficient, especially if students have to take crucial decisions for their professional future. Their representation of working life is also often partial and biased by the media and the entertainment industry. Often students believe that they can learn prestigious professions like medical doctor or veterinary without realising how far away they are with their school-learned competencies from such studies. Secondly, it seems obvious that there is not enough guidance and preparation for the important transitions in the school system, from school-based learning to apprenticeships and from school to employment. Information is not enough, because this must be made accessible and usable by the students at the crucial transitions in their school path.

3.4.2. School traps

These traps were often cited by teachers, and the phenomenon has, as far as we know, not yet been studied in the literature. We have a school trap if a given period of the curriculum is suddenly followed by a period which is much more difficult. Pupils are often insufficiently aware, informed and prepared for this change. During the easier track, competencies should be built up which are necessary for the harder track, but often they are not. One of these tracks is the transition from the lower secondary vocational (7th to 9th grades) to the middle secondary vocational track, especially if pupils choose more difficult studies (like 10th grade in paramedical studies).

3.4.3. The case of apprenticeship

Problems with apprenticeships are often cited as causes of dropping out. The transition from school-based learning tracks to enterprise-based learning is difficult to manage for most students. Lack of information is a first reason. In addition, students may not be eligible for the careers they would prefer due to poor results at school. In many professional fields, there are not enough available places. Finally, some placements are badly organised, do not provide real training opportunities or may exploit the young apprentices. Many incidences of dropping out occur either due to not finding an apprenticeship placement, or to the incompatibility between the youngster and the placement.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The views expressed were coherent with findings in the research literature (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Millet & Thin, 2005). They express perceived causes by the teachers and are as such not automatically "real" causes. Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult, even for a directly implicated actor in the field, to disentangle causes from effects. Too great a proximity to the problematic population can also create bias. But the dimensions that have been put forward constitute important candidate variables for further explorations and interventions.

Furthermore, it seems sensible that effective intervention on dropping out should focus on the most modifiable parameters, as for example, intelligence, families, or peers are difficult to modify. Some issues could be highlighted. First the role of language education should be reconsidered (Berg & Weis, 2005), especially as the ten thousands of employees who cross the border to work in Luxembourg have generally fewer language competencies than the indigenous people but work without any major problems in all sectors of the society. One exception is the public service which is still held exclusively by the trilingual Luxembourgers. But if so many people can work in Luxembourg without mastering three or four languages, it should be possible to lower the load of languages in education, which would at the same time allow for a better scientific education. A second important issue is educational and vocational guidance, where a systematic maturation of the vocational choice should be organised in schools. A better coordination between guidance centres would also improve the offer. Finally, a reconsideration of the curricula architecture should be undertaken in order to remove the existing school traps as far as possible. These reforms could improve the situation and lower the proportion of dropping out, even if a complete reduction of the phenomenon seems unrealistic.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund in the framework of the VIVRE Program; grant number FNR/06/14/13.

References

- Battin-Pearson, S., & Newcomb, M. D. (2000). Predictors of early high school dropout: a test of five theories. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 568-582.
- Berg, C., & Weis, C. (2005). *Sociologie de l'enseignement des langues dans un univers multilingue*. Luxembourg: MENFP/CESIJÉ.
- Eurydice (2007). *L'éducation au Luxembourg*. Luxembourg: MENFP.
- MENFP (2010). *Les chiffres clés de l'Education nationale 2008-2009*. Luxembourg: MENFP.
- MENFP (2009). *Le décrochage scolaire au Luxembourg: Année scolaire 2007-2008*. Luxembourg: MENFP.
- Millet, M., & Thin, D. (2005). *Ruptures scolaires: L'école à l'épreuve de la question sociale*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- OCDE (2003). *Examen thématique de l'OCDE d'information, de conseil et d'orientation. Examen par pays: Luxembourg*. Paris: OCDE.